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ABSTRACT

This paper describes audio-feedback as a teaching method for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing classes. Using this method, writing instructors respond to students' compositions by recording their comments onto an audiocassette, then returning the paper and cassette to the students. The first section describes audio-feedback and explains why it is an effective alternative to traditional written comments (e.g., it lets instructors talk out comments instead of scribbling remarks in the margins, it allows instructors to provide students with a holistic impression of their writing, and it shifts teacher participation in the writing process from being an impersonal grader to being a writing coach). The next sections describe a typical audio-feedback session and discuss when to use audio-feedback, suggesting that it is particularly effective at the beginning of the semester. Finally, the paper offers some caveats for those who want to incorporate audio-feedback into their teaching (e.g., some students do not have access to cassette players, teachers should not be tempted to substitute audio-feedback for teacher-student conferences, and it may take some time for teachers and their students to become accustomed to spoken rather than written comments). (SM)

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Audio-Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom

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Rethinking the Red Ink: Audio-Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom

ROBERT JOHANSON

If there were a Holy Grail in the teaching of ESL/EFL composition, it would probably contain the secrets of how to most effectively respond to our students' writing. In this article, I wish to offer a solution to this quest by describing audio-feedback, a practice that has proven to be a valued addition to my teaching of academic writing. I will begin by briefly defining audio-feedback and show why I have found it to be an effective alternative to traditional written comments. Then I shall offer some caveats for those who might wish to incorporate audio-feedback into their teaching methods.

INTRODUCTION

Audio-feedback is a teaching method in which the writing instructor responds to students' compositions by recording his or her comments onto an audiocassette tape. Following the recording session, which typically lasts from 5 to 20 minutes for each paper, the instructor returns the paper and the cassette tape to the student. The student then revises the paper while listening to the teacher's recorded comments.

Let me emphasize that I am hardly the first to employ audio-feedback in the teaching of ESL/EFL writing. Unfortunately, a lamentable dearth of research exists in the second language writing research literature on this potentially useful pedagogical tool. My hope is that the technique discussed here will both encourage writing instructors to experiment with this nontraditional means of providing feedback to students and motivate researchers to produce both qualitative and quantitative research on its efficacy in the writing classroom. Furthermore, I want to emphasize that I do not advocate audio-feedback as the *only* method teachers use to respond to their students' writing. Rather, I suggest that audio-feedback be employed in tandem with other time-proven response methods such as peer editing and teacher-student conferences.

DESCRIPTION OF AUDIO-FEEDBACK

While audio-feedback could be applied at all levels of ESL/EFL composition, the approach I describe in this paper has been tailored to fit the academic writing classes I teach to international graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin. Representing a broad range of disci-

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plines in both the natural and social sciences, a majority of my students have been required by their advisors to take my course. Hence, my aim is to provide them with a solid foundation of general academic writing skills as rapidly as possible. To do this, I rely heavily on both the social constructionist philosophy (which maintains that the principal challenge facing newcomers to the discourse community of their field is to become familiar with and to utilize its rhetorical conventions) and the process approach (in which composing is broken down into the following stages—brainstorming, clustering, outlining, drafting, and revision). I have found that audio-feedback complements these two methods because by *recording* my impressions, I can offer students more holistic comments about their writing, impart to them my own "hierarchy of corrections," and inform them of the recursive process I go through as I attempt to negotiate the meaning of their written texts.

When I first learned of audio-feedback, I was, at best, skeptical. Although the idea of "talking out" my comments sounded interesting, I doubted that it would be worth the time and energy. Once I began experimenting with this method, however, I learned that it actually saves me *and* my students a lot of time in the long run. More importantly, it enhances the quality of the feedback and students' responses to it. Because I am able to make more comprehensive comments, I do not have to explain and re-explain my ideas to each student after class and in office hours. At the same time, my students report that audio-feedback affords them the opportunity to listen to my comments as often as they wish, whenever and wherever they wish.

Another motivation for trying audio-feedback came when I began to realize that the comments and corrections I had so painstakingly scribbled in the margins were going largely unheeded. It seemed that no matter how carefully I had constructed my feedback, subsequent teacher-student conferences would reveal a major gap of understanding between what I thought I was saying in my comments and how they were perceived by my students.

One of the most beneficial consequences of this approach is that I am able to convey to my students my own "hierarchy of errors." When students read written comments on a corrected text, they have no way of knowing the order in which the comments were made and which ones the teacher considers particularly important. Most of my students, originally taught English according to the Grammar Translation Method in their home countries, tend to view writing as a grammatical exercise rather than as a process of constructing meaning. Because they

believe that the content and organization of their essays are subordinate to sentence-level grammatical accuracy, they tend to downplay comments on how to develop their ideas at the expense of grammatical issues such as proper subject-verb agreement.

To counter this undue emphasis on grammar, I typically employ audio-feedback in two stages for each draft of a student's paper. For the first draft, I comment only on content and organizational issues in the text. Only after students have digested my initial comments on how they organized their ideas do I comment on sentence-level linguistic mistakes such as punctuation and run-on sentences. I have found that, by taking this approach, audio-feedback allows me to emphasize content over discrete-point grammar mistakes. Students have reported that this helps them combat the urge to over-monitor their composing in earlier drafts and focus more on organization than grammar.

Audio-feedback also complements the process approach to teaching composition, as it allows the instructor to provide students with a holistic impression of their writing. Before using audio-feedback, I found it both time-consuming and frustrating to craft comments that were detailed enough to be understood and yet succinct enough to fit in the margins. Given that most of my comments are in the form of questions, I have found that with audio-feedback I can offer richer feedback and different versions of the same comment from different angles to maximize student comprehension. Instead of being forced to condense my comments in one digestible sentence in the margin, I could "speak" to each student as though he or she were in a face-to-face conference.

Another advantage of audio-feedback is that by *talking* out my comments, my participation in the writing process shifts from being an impersonal grader to a writing *coach*. Many of my students have reported that, among the five skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, and culture), writing provokes the most anxiety for them. The reasons they often cite are that they lack experience writing in English and that the mistakes one makes are on permanent display for whomever might stumble across their text. To assuage my students' fear of writing in English, I strive to offer positive feedback that capitalizes on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. I do this by asking questions as opposed to making emphatic statements. For example, I may make such comments as "I like this sentence, but are you sure that it belongs in this paragraph?" or "You have constructed a strong argument here. Have you considered rearranging your points so that you can conclude with the strongest ones?" As I ask these

questions, I try to maintain a positive and encouraging tone of voice that shows that I care about my students and their writing.

Audio-feedback also offers the writing instructor the opportunity to demonstrate the processes employed in negotiating the meaning of students' texts. As with many writing teachers, I do not simply dive into the student's text and read it from introduction to conclusion. Instead, I spend a couple of minutes reviewing the format of the draft by checking whether there are page numbers, whether the margins and font are set appropriately, and whether the references conform to APA standards. After covering these points, I quickly skim the body paragraphs to determine whether the student has employed the necessary cohesive devices (transitions) for presenting arguments. Many international students lack experience writing the deductive, writer-responsible prose expected of them in U.S. academia. As a result, they are often surprised—sometimes even offended—when the reader informs them that it was difficult to follow their arguments. Through audio-feedback, students can "hear" my difficulty understanding their moves in "real time." This approach has saved me countless hours in teacher-student conferences because I am not required to re-explain what it was that confused me in reading a student's text.

Yet another advantage of audio-feedback is that it allows me to show my students that, contrary to what they sometimes think, native speakers—even teachers—are not omniscient beings who always have the perfect word or expression on the tip of their tongues. Often overwhelmed by the prodigious linguistic and psychological difficulties they face as "outsiders" in U.S. universities, many international students tend to be depressed about the quality of their English writing. There are a number of reasons for this:

- International students often have extremely high expectations of themselves (as most were at the top of the class in their home universities).
- Many professors in U.S. academia tend to view their writing from a deficiency standpoint.
- Although international students rarely have the chance to view their native-speaking colleagues' writing, they often assume that their own is sub-par in comparison.

To counter these concerns, I concentrate on building a sense of solidarity with my students as "mutual sufferers" of the difficulties of writing. When suggesting another way to rephrase a sentence, for example, I sometimes take several minutes to "talk aloud" as I continue to formulate and reformulate my suggestions. Hearing that "even a teacher"

might have difficulty finding the perfect term seems to be a great relief to the students. This, coupled with the enthusiastic intonation in which I express my comments, tends to be an emotional boost for them in that they realize they are not alone in their "struggle" with the writing process.

A Typical Audio-Feedback Session

As mentioned above, I typically employ the process approach (brainstorming, clustering, outlining, drafting, and revising) and social interactive activities (peer editing and teacher-student conferences) in my writing classes. After students have discussed their topic and justified their outline with their peer writing partner(s), I ask them to write the first draft and, with it, submit a blank 60- or 90-minute cassette tape.

With the student's first draft in front of me and pencil in hand, I turn on the tape recorder and speak into the microphone as if "we" were in a conference. I invariably begin with a short greeting such as, "You're doing a great job in the class so far. . . ." Then I comment on my general impressions of the format along the lines of "Do all of your citations conform to the APA guidelines? Are you sure that you need to capitalize the titles of a journal article . . .?" Finally I offer some questions regarding the student's moves and how they organized their argument, such as, "In all of the body paragraphs you do a good job of offering transitions except the last paragraph. What transitions might be better suited for the last paragraph?" As I speak, I mark the paper, often with a question mark and a short phrase. I am also careful to repeat with some frequency which section I am examining. In this way, the students will have little trouble following my corrections as they listen to the tape with the paper before them.

As noted above, it is not until the second or subsequent draft that I comment on grammatical errors. As I "talk out" my comments, I mark the errors using standard correction symbols such as those located in the *Bedford Handbook for Writers*. By using these symbols, I can offer my students the opportunity to identify their topical errors *before* they listen to the cassette or when they do not have a tape player at hand. Many students have reported that they first read the correction symbols, try to identify the appropriate "answer," and then listen to the tape to confirm their understanding.

After I have finished making my comments, which can vary from between 5 and 30 minutes, depending on which draft is being read, I then return the tape and paper to the student and set a due date for the next draft.

I often suggest that the student listen to the tape at least twice to make sure that he or she has understood my comments. Some students report that they find it easier first to listen to the tape alone and then with their paper in front of them. I also require that students submit the previous draft(s) with the draft they are submitting. By looking at the previous draft(s), I can review my original comments and questions to determine whether the student took them into consideration in rewriting the paper.

When to use Audio-Feedback

I have found that the use of audio-feedback is particularly effective at the beginning of the semester. This early introduction to the learning method enables the students to become accustomed to my idiosyncratic manner of speaking (pronunciation, word choice, intonation, etc.) and helps to dispel the notion that I am an autocratic teacher out to "grade" them (Hafez, 1999). It is well-known in our field that the concept of "teacher" is a culturally-laden term. In some Asian cultures, for example, university instructors tend to be authority figures who demand deference from students, whereas in the United States the teacher-student relationship is often less hierarchical. I have found that employing audio-feedback early in the semester helps students make the necessary cultural adjustments to understand the "open" relationship that I prefer.

Another advantage to using audio-feedback early in the semester is that it prepares students psychologically and linguistically for the conferences I will hold with them later in the semester. As noted above, many of my students come from education systems in which the purpose of English instruction is to help students pass entrance examinations rather than increase their communicative competence. Since these entrance examinations often contain only a single "one-shot" English writing component, most students arrive in the United States unfamiliar with the process approach to first and second language composition. By hearing on tape how I approach the reading of their essays, they become familiar with my own manner of assessing their essay. In large part, this effort involves learning the writing-teacher-jargon that I use when I discuss their writing, including such terms as cohesive device (transition), moves, outline, brainstorming, topic sentence, main idea, and thesis statement. As a result, the students are better prepared for teacher-student conferences and adapt more easily to my philosophy towards teaching and the writing process in general.

Caveats

As mentioned above, responding to students' essays with

audio-feedback allows the instructor to give more feedback than traditional methods. However, through firsthand experience and conversations with my colleagues, I have learned that it is easy to overload students with too much information during the first audio-feedback session. Also, students who have never encountered audio-feedback also need some time to become accustomed to it. Since most students have no prior experience listening to an instructor analyze their writing on tape, their ability to absorb the teacher's comments is likely to be limited.

Teachers using audio-feedback for the first time should not wait until the last moment and try to evaluate the entire class in one sitting. Although audio-feedback saves the instructor much time in the long run because he or she does not have to "rehash" statements for each student (who might, for example, not understand the teacher's handwriting on a particular comment), it takes some time to become comfortable with the process. If teachers rush through their audio-feedback sessions, they might speak too quickly for their students to grasp what they are trying to tell them.

Another problem I have run into in the past involves the availability of cassette players for students. With the advent of CDs, I have found that some students do not have access to cassette players. Before implementing audio-feedback, the instructor should make sure that students can either borrow a cassette player from the school or from a classmate. Also, even when students do have cassette players, more than a few students simply forget to bring the blank cassettes on the day they are instructed to do so. Hence, I suggest that instructors begin asking for students' cassettes at least two class sessions prior to the audio-feedback session.

A final caveat: Do not succumb to the temptation of substituting audio-feedback for teacher-student conferences. It must be recognized that audio-feedback does not offer the all-important one-on-one interchange between student and teacher that allows the teacher to strengthen effectively the student's learning. Although the teacher might feel that his or her comments are clear and concise, some students have more difficulty understanding than others. Furthermore, students may be embarrassed to admit that they did not understand the teachers' comments due to low listening comprehension skills. For this reason, teachers should allow ample class time for students to ask any questions they might have regarding their audio-feedback, especially following the first session. In addition, instructors must make certain that audio-feedback does not curtail teacher-student conferences.

CONCLUSION

In my teaching of ESL/EFL composition to international students, I have found audio-feedback to be an indispensable addition to my teaching methodologies for student writing. It enables the instructor to "talk out" comments instead of scribbling remarks in the margins. It also allows the instructor the opportunity to impart more meaningful feedback to the student, reveals his or her "hierarchy of errors," and offers the student the opportunity to experience the process that the instructor goes through in reading a paper. With all of these advantages, however, instructors who use this method should keep in mind that it may take some time for them and their students to become accustomed to spoken rather than written comments. They must also remember that audio-feedback should be seen as an addition to—and not a substitute for—other means of enhancing the development of writing skills.

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